

On June 4th, 2009, Kay Armstrong and I embarked on a 28 hour flight to the Philippines – a country that is literally on the other side of the world (with a 12 hour time difference from NY!). We were headed to Tacloban, a provincial town on the island of Leyte. As excited as we were for our journey, we could have never anticipated how those 6 weeks in Tacloban would have changed our lives forever.



Kay and I arriving at the Tacloban airport

Since my mother was born in the Philippines, being in the Philippines was not new to me (this was my third trip there). However, my only experiences have been as a tourist in the bigger metropolitan cities. Tacloban and its surrounding areas are the provinces and we also stayed with a host family. This was my first time to interact and be part of the local barangay (neighborhood) and live life a typical Filipina!



Typical street in Bliss barangay



Our homestay + Mama

Getting situated in Tacloban and accustomed to the heat and Filipino way of life was difficult at first but luckily, our host family was the best! Pipey, our host, who we called Nanay (which means mom) was the friendliest and most hospitable person I have ever met. She always made

sure that Kay and I didn't lack in anything (most especially food!). When I was sick, Nanay made sure to make something extra for dinner for me so that I could eat and would constantly ask me if I was feeling better. Chabel was a 10-year-old girl that lived at our homestay. She was shy at first but once she got to know us, she was the craziest ball of energy! We would sing songs and play countless hours of cards with her. Lucy was Chabel's mother and loved to give us the gossip about what was happening around the barangay. Mama was the grandmother of the house and was one of the kindest women I have ever met. She would always tell us to stay safe and pray for us before our trips.



Kay, Nanay and I on a jeepney



Lucy, Chabel, and Nanay at Chabel's ballet recital



Chabel – cutest girl ever!

While in Tacloban, we worked at the Home for Girls, which is a shelter for physically and sexually abused girls from ages 8-19. Most girls here looked much younger for their age. When we walked in our first day, 54 girls were curiously looking at us and giving us shy smiles. By the end of the day when it was time to leave, they were already grabbing onto our hands and saying, “Are you coming back tomorrow Ate (older sister)?” The level of English they knew

ranged from fluent to not being able to speak it at all – but communicating was never a big problem because they were so excited to be involved in what we were doing for the day. We played a lot of games such as Bingo. We also had arts and crafts activities that the girls loved to do – they were all so creative with such few supplies to work with! But their favorite activity was when we put some music on – they all loved dancing! Even girls who had chores would pause and watch as the other girls started showing their best moves. All these girls came from extremely troubling and horrifying pasts and yet, were always so happy and open.



Some of the girls at Home for Girls

In addition to working at the Home for Girls, we also tutored 5th grade every late afternoon from 5:30-6:30. We did countless problems of multiplication and division and also taught about some

other subjects such as the solar system, roman numerals, fractions, adverbs, and synonyms/antonyms. They were always extremely hyper and fun to work with.



Some of 5th grade working on problems



Helping out

During one of our last days in Tacloban, we helped our friend, Crystal, paint a mural on the wall at the volunteer center. It was tons of fun and all the kids in the barangay came to watch.



Crystal and I



Finished product!

Our time in the Philippines was one of the most challenging things I have ever done but also the most rewarding. I am still amazed by the friendliness and hospitality that was shown by our host family and the people of Bliss. I will never forget it and hope to go back someday.